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ABSTRACT

This document deals with a common problem: the fact that "needs assessment" is often required by law and regulation, but there is little agreement on what the term means or what the process entails. The uses and definitions of the term "needs assessment" are examined and categorized along with the various methodologies which are ascribed to it. These categories include needs assessment: (1) as survey research; (2) as consumer demand analysis; (3) as a process of problems identification and diagnosis; (4) as policy priority setting; and (5) as other types of data or analysis. The bibliography presents abstracts of selected sources which tell the types of document, definition of "need", definition of "needs assessment," methods of collection and analysis, other information, and comments or critiques of the literature. (BN)

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NEEDS ASSESSMENT:

AN EXPLORATORY CRITIQUE

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U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

May, 1977

NEEDS ASSESSMENT:

AN EXPLORATORY CRITIQUE

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May, 1977

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PREFACE

This paper is being made widely available to persons interested in "needs assessment". It is one of several papers on this subject which my office is undertaking to create under the general direction of Walton Francis. Another of these, A Compendium of Laws and Regulations Requiring Needs Assessment, is also being issued this month. These papers are part of a larger study of human services planning being conducted by my office, a study which aims at rationalizing planning requirements and improving planning practices.

The subject is important if for no other reasons than the widespread belief, mandated upon States in dozens of laws, that "needs assessment" is the first and most important step in planning for resource allocation; and the findings of this paper as to the failure of the national literature to demonstrate the correctness or feasibility of this belief, how to use, or even to define "needs assessment".

We view our effort as the initiation of a dialogue with both practitioners and theoreticians, and welcome comments and suggestions on the problem, on our papers, and on steps which the Department or others might usefully take. Comments and requests for copies of our papers should be sent to the address below.

Our thanks to Kristina Varenais, who discovered that the seemingly simple summer assignment of identifying needs assessment literature of use to State and local governments was virtually impossible to fulfill--and thereby identified the major problem which her paper presents and analyses.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	i
Summary of Findings	v
I. "Needs Assessment": A Semantic Jungle	1
A. "Needs": A Closer Look	2
B. "Needs Assessment": A Term with Many Interpretations	4
1. "Needs Assessment" as Survey Research	5
2. "Needs Assessment" as Consumer Demand Analysis	7
3. "Needs Assessment" as the process of Problem Identification and Diagnosis	8
4. "Needs Assessment" in terms of Policy Priority Setting	10
5. "Needs Assessment" as any other type of data or analysis	11
II. "Needs Assessment": A Critique of its Potential Utility	15
A. "Needs Assessment": The Users	15
B. "Needs Assessment": The Environment	17
Appendix: An Annotated Biblography of "Needs Assessment" Literature	19
Footnotes	46

Introduction

The first mention of the possible usefulness of taking a closer look at the "needs assessment" process occurred at a meeting of an HEW Planning Study group in October of 1975. The planning study is an effort on the part of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation of HEW to help state and local human service practitioners choose the planning methodologies best suited to deliver services to their clients. It is an ongoing effort to find and examine alternatives to "rational" planning models as well as to locate and identify successful planning practice at the state and local levels. "Needs assessment" appears as a first step in many of these rational planning models and therefore it was considered an important activity to explore.

At present, the phrase "need assessment" is widely used. It often appears in legislation and in regulations and guidelines for program operation. In addition, many manuals have been written to aid potential assessors in carrying out the process. But problems arise because it appears that the term is not used to mean the same process (or set of processes) or purposes in all of the above contexts. "Needs Assessment" does not have a unique, operational interpretation.

At its start, this paper was intended to be an annotated bibliography on useful techniques (similar to that produced by the State of Florida described in the Appendix), which could be used as a useful reference

tool by individuals who wished to undertake the activity. As source material was collected, it became apparent that there existed so many different interpretations of the term that the project had no meaningful boundaries. Therefore, I made an attempt to sort out many views of "needs assessment": and to locate the "real" meaning of terms. As it turned out, I was unable to find a specific, operational definition of the term. I found many vague ones.

The bibliography was orginally intended to contain many more sources. But, through time, many of the materials seemed to have less and less relevance to the definition and meaning of the term, or to offer less than useful guidance to practitioners. The literature included and annotated contains the more specific discussions of the context and state-of-the art of "needs assessment." The annotation is set up to point out not only the types of data collection and/or analytic techniques that each piece includes, but also to show what explanations are missing. Many sources suggest intricate sets of activities to produce information, but omit satisfactory explanations of <u>what</u> these processes are directed toward or <u>how</u> the data would be used. This paper does not attempt to exhaust the activities that are encompassed by the "needs assessment" literature, but merely tries to indicate that confusion exists. The comments at the end of each annotation try to give indications of problems reflected in the literature, possible gaps or difficiencies in the arguments for needs assessment, and difficulties in implementing the suggested techniques.

The bibliography omits "cookbook" material on subjects such as survey research which can be found in many other bibliographies.

After extensive thought and discussion on the topic of "needs assessment", questions emerged about the usefulness and importance of the process of performing extensive studies to generate information to help make better decisions. The purpose of the discussion in this paper is not to cast aspersions on all types of information-generation processes; rather it is offered to point out some implications of performing an activity which is supposed to aid in planning, when in fact it may not do so at all. The paper also offers some suggestions on certain aspects of information utilization that it may be useful to consider before a "needs assessment" is undertaken. Due to the importance of addressing the questions of the definitions of "needs assessment" and its usefulness as an activity, more pages are devoted to the resulting analysis than to the bibliography itself.

The basic intent of the paper is not to point out a few findings in the area of "needs assessment", but, more importantly, to encourage individuals engaged in "needs assessment" to think and ask questions about the meaning of the term and the possible usefulness of the process and its potential products.

Due to this focus, it hopefully fulfills the original objective of usefulness to state and local practitioners in the field of human services.

Many sincere thanks to Walton Francis who conceived many of the ideas in this paper, Wayne Kimmel who aided in much of the editing work, and Douglas Henton who gave comments and criticisms on the various drafts. They also directed me to information and engaged in many useful discussions that helped me locate the glimmer at the end of the tunnel of "needs assessment" confusion.

Summary of Findings

This paper tries to examine the uses and definitions of the term "needs assessment", and the various methodologies which are ascribed to it. It also raises questions about the value of the activity. The sources of information employed were books, manuals, journal articles, legislation, and individuals familiar with the field.

What has been found is that neither the word "need" nor the term "needs assessment" have commonly accepted or manageable definitions. "Needs assessment" is often required by law and regulation but there appears to be little indication of what the term means or what the process entails. Yet, despite this lack of clarity, one underlying assumption exists: "Needs assessment" is a process which results in useful information. Interpretations of the term vary from different methods of data collection to different types of analytical tools used to make information more useful to decision-makers. To compound the confusion, some versions of "needs assessment" encompass both kinds of activities, while others refer to only one. There are several ways in which this confusion could be alleviated. One way would be to try to strike the word from the human services' vocabulary, but that is impossible. Another more plausible alternative might be to use the term in a very specific way; defining the intent, extent and purpose of a "need assessment" study. Or, thirdly, "needs assessment" could be recognized as an all-encompassing term and

appropriate labels for the specific activities which are being carried out could be used instead in any specific case. In any event, the confusion that is caused by the term "needs assessment" should be dealt with in some manner to avoid perpetuating the problem.

An inspection of each of the activities referred to as "needs assessment" raises the larger question of the general value of information collection and analysis for policy purposes. The "needs assessment" process is sometimes seen as a step in a rational planning process and as useful tool in decision-making. Since information is not inherently or automatically useful, however, the question arises as to whether "needs assessment" information does or could influence decisions. The information which is collection by elaborate "needs assessment" activities may often be found in much simpler and cheaper ways. This is not to say that all methods of information collected are disfunctional, but rather that many "needs assessments" may be repetitive in their quest for "facts". There exists specific literature which argues that many of the types of research cited as "needs assessment" are not ordinarily of much policy utility. Specific uses of information must be considered to find the specific types of analysis and data that may be pertinent to a decision. This should involve the use of terms which describe specific research and analysis techniques rather than the use of the vague and undefinable term 'needs assessment."

A difficulty with "needs assessment" activities also arises from the necessity to consider the intended uses of information and this leads back to the consideration of who the user(s) will be. Since "needs" and "need assessment" are not well defined, it is often the case that a subjective judgment is made to set boundaries on what is, or is not, a "need." By setting such limits, the process becomes value-laden and the notion of paternalism appears. Yet it is intuitively appealing to think that there exists a process which would allow one to interview community residents to find out their "needs," and then fill identified "gaps." These are only a few of the scores of issues that may have to be considered before a useful "needs assessment" could be performed.

I. "Needs Assessment": A Semantic Jungle

In the human services vocabulary, the term "needs assessment" has many different usages and appearances. It appears in legislation (e.g. the 1973 Amendments to the Older Americans Act), manuals (e.g. Center for Social Research and Development, Analysis and Syntheses of Needs Assessment in the Field of Human Services), and journal articles (e.g. Shapek, Raymond A., "Problems and Deficiencies in the Needs Assessment Process," Public Administration Review.)

But it seems the term has never been clearly defined. Answers to the following questions must be explored to help locate a specific definition and use of the term "needs assessment."

- o Has anyone ever found an operational definition of "needs assessment"? If so, what is it?
- o And if no one can define it, how do they know what, how and for whom the process is done?
- o How do the "needs" assessors know that "needs assessment" is what fulfills their purpose?

This paper explores only a subset of these questions as they are reflected in the literature on "needs assessment." Generally for each different interpretation, it presents:

a) a sorting out of definitions and meanings,

b) a brief discussion of some of the potential limitations and pit-falls (most of which the "needs assessment" literature fails to mention), but

c) no discussion of actual practice.

A. "Needs": A Closer Look

A fundamental problem when attempting to define the term "needs assessment" is that the word "need" is unclear or only vaguely defined. "Needs" for basic existence such as food, clothing and shelter are not discussed here. 1/ In the context of human services, "need" may mean different things to different people. For example, a millionaire may "need" private tutors to educate his/her children, while a family with an income below the poverty line may "need" improved educational facilities in the local public schools. In the current "needs assessment" literature the word "need" is usually left undefined. 2/ In some cases, "need" is explained in broad terms which cover all wants, tastes, and preferences of the citizens of a community. For example, the Human Services Institute defines "need" as "any identifiable condition which limits a person as an individual or family member in meeting his or her full potential." Also, there sometimes exists an implied notion of "need." Many sources refer to general social goals which are perceived by interests groups or elected officials. But it is unclear, for example, when a community "needs" better health care, whether these "needs" include a new clinic as well as a resident doctor in every household. Here again it could be said that every child in the country who has "needed" and received day-care services, may also have "needed" some kind of training in the basic skills at one time or another. 3/ In other words, the word "need" is not limiting; it does not imply what is not a "need."

It is possible, however, to limit the word "need" arbitrarily to encompass only certain types and amounts of services for given individuals with given income levels, but there are problems with such limitations. For example, as discussed below, the "need" for day-care or any other service may be originally a "need" for cash. One does not see in the "needs assessment" literature the notion that a "need" for a service may be due to a decision on the part of social policy decision-makers as to where an individual should spend available cash. For example, a decision could be made a human resources agency to attempt to lower the unemployment rate among black women. A community survey may indicate that 30% of the unemployed black women below the poverty line have children ages 6 and above so they could be employed. Therefore the decision to employ these women creates the "need" for day-care facilities, and for vocational training and placement services. 4/ In setting arbitrary limits such decisions as to what is "needed" are not made by individuals who experience the "need." A related issue is the failure to use cost as a limiting factor. Price-free demand can be equated with infinite wants. (See discussion of "consumer demand analysis" below for a more in-depth look into this aspect of limiting factors.) In short, insofar as the literature deals with this issue the word "need" is either left unclarified by the "needs" assessors, or it is defined in very broad terms, or it is arbitrarily limited by them. While arbitrariness is not necessarily bad, when carefully articulated, documented, and justified in context, the "needs assessment" literature fails even to mention the problem. 5/

B. "Needs Assessment": A Term With Many Interpretations

A basic confusion with the term "needs assessment" stems from the fact that useful data and information can be generated and analyzed in many different ways. The "needs assessment" literature takes as a premise the idea that the data and information produced will help make better decisions. 6/ "Needs assessment" is often considered any process performed to aid individuals in designing desirable changes in the human services delivery process.

And what different people consider useful information seems to rule the way they interpret the term "needs assessment". To each of these individuals "needs assessment" consists of different information producing techniques for data collection and/or approaches to analyzing information. Each method has its own label. Problems arise when these various types of data collection and/or interpretation are used in various combinations and the resulting processes are all called by one name: "needs assessment." 7/

An examination of the literature suggests that the term "needs assessment" refers to several common components, which, depending on the individual writer, are included or grouped in different combinations. And there are additional techniques of problem-finding, problem-solving, and decision-making methodologies which are similar to the general thrust of the "needs assessment" literature but are often simply not mentioned.

Some of the basic components contained in the various interpretations of "needs assessment" are: (1) "survey research" 8/, (2) "consumer demand" 9/, (3) "problem identification and diagnosis" 10/, (4) "policy priority-setting" 11/, and (5) any other useful information generating activities.

Another point in reference to the lack of specific definition is that "needs assessment" may have an intuitive definition. It is quite possible to imagine a process of going to a community, interviewing the residents to find the incidence of some pre-determined set of "needs" or deficiencies, compiling the results, and trying to give the people what they asked for. Alternatively, it is intuitively appealing to assert that unless unmet needs are located, policy decisions cannot be made. But this inductive process breaks down under the scrutiny of the words "need" and "needs assessment." 12/

1. "Needs Assessment" as Survey Research

One version of "needs assessment" is "survey research" since the purpose of survey research is to collect quantifiable data from primary sources for a given geographical area. Survey research focuses on how to collect information, not on how to interpret it. The survey research method of "needs assessment" may be a viable way to collect information in a community for a statistician or other individual familiar and comfortable

with such data. To him or her survey may appear to be the "best" method to "assess need" in a community, but there are also alternative methods.

A related and important point is whether information produced by survey research is useful to policy makers. Survey researchers sometimes assume that data is automatically useful and that due to its inherent importance and relevance, it points to an obvious decision. But there exist many factors not captured by survey data which must be taken into consideration. Making policy judgments from survey data alone may be dangerous. Many problems may exist. A small sample of those might be:

- o Missing data may reveal problems that would not otherwise be known.
- o An inspection of the decision-making arena and the fact(s) that influence policy action may reveal reasons not to perform in a decided way.
- o Contingency planning or a set of alternative solutions (or fail-safe methods) may need to be introduced to prevent unforseen disaster.
- o A decision-maker may not be familiar with survey data and its translation into policy terms may be required.

Decisions are rarely as obvious as some survey researchers may think and most decisions that are supposedly instigated by "needs assessment" are not conceived by statisticians. "Needs assessment" by way of survey research does not automatically result in information useful to decision-makers. 13/

To add to the confusion the term "needs assessment" is sometimes used for survey research alone, and sometimes to encompass survey research along with other analytical methods. 14/

2. "Needs Assessment" as Consumer Demand Analysis

Another phrase sometimes used in place of "needs assessment" is "consumer demand analysis," which puts articulated "needs" in the economic framework of supply and demand. Within this framework the limiting factor on a universal "wish-list" is the cost of the item(s) or services(s) "needed." 15/ "Need" within the context of economic is a lack or deficiency measured by the willingness of consumers to spend their income to satisfy it. While the criterion of a budget constraint is arbitrary, income limitations exist in all societies and this type of limited notion of "need" is less subjective than other arbitrary limits that may be imposed by an individual.

While "consumer demand" and "need" are sometimes used interchangeably, this is very rare. "Needs assessment" literature seldom references or indicates awareness of "consumer demand" theory. 16/ For example, a population survey may indicate the desire ("need") for day-care centers in a community. However, an examination of survey findings in relation to affordability may indicate that the number of day-care centers is adequate, but that they are too expensive (or otherwise undesirable) for community residents. "Consumer demand" may be less than it would be if people had more money, and the shortage may be of money, not of day-care centers. Definitional problems exist with the notion of unaffordability as well, but they have been handled relatively well by economists. The term "consumer demand," when it is expressed in relation to a price, is clearer than the term "needs assessment."

3. "Needs assessment" as the process of Problem Identification and Diagnosis"

A third view of "needs assessment" refers to the collection of primary and secondary data to identify and quantify problems. This approach is usually proposed in the context of a determined geographic area. Analysis may result in information useful to decision-makers. This process is a combination of survey research, secondary data collection, and information interpretation which may result in a written diagnosis of issues or problems (as opposed to the result of "survey research" which usually produces uninterpreted data about a community). "Needs assessment" used this way may be more clearly and simply characterized as "problem definition and diagnosis," where the emphasis is on the interpretation of data and not on the means of collecting it.

Problem identification and diagnosis can be a useful tool in collecting information on a given problem within a community. Examination of data may reveal that the origins of a "problem" preceived by the population may be the result of larger, less obvious causes which may imply a different set of solutions. Causal analysis must follow statistical analysis if articulated problems are to be understood. For example, a community survey may indicate there is a high crime rate in a given area. A recommendation might be to hire more police officers. However, a closer look at the problem may reveal that poor street lighting allows for easy escape for offenders, resulting in a higher rate of crime.

An even closer look may indicate that the problem lies with recidivism, a phenomenon not under police control. Additional police protection may, therefore, not be the most efficient solution. Explicitly considering

alternative solutions to problems is useful, because by dealing with causes, given problems may be clarified. Treating only symptoms could be an endless process and may not enhance understanding.

Moreover, an extensive community survey may not be necessary to uncover for instance, the crime rate in a given area. Police records, the conditions of buildings, and the unemployment rate of the area, to mention a few available statistics, may indicate the crime phenomenon. In other words, the use of secondary source information may reveal the same "truth" at a much lower cost than a survey. 17/ Together, primary and secondary data collection coupled with causal analysis is another type of "needs assessment", but a more descriptive label for this activity may be "problem identification and diagnosis."

4. "Needs Assessment" in Terms of Policy Priority Setting

"Needs assessment" may also refer to the process of setting policy priorities in response to articulated problems within a community. Under this approach, neither the method of data collection nor the type of information to be collected is specified. The method includes deriving a list of policy issues from existing information, popular political issues, interest group influence, budgetary allocations, or evidence about the effectiveness and efficiency of programs. The focus on this method is to aid officials in making policy choices. The focus of this method is to aid officials in making policy choices. Since politicians sometimes are more likely to be reactive than proactive, action may be initiated by presenting them with the product of extensive analysis (e.g., on

possible solutions to a given problem in a community) to which they can respond.

For example, data may be collected on the learning disabilities of school age children within a community and the problem may be related to a lack of familiarity with academic learning at home before the child enters school. Possible policy recommendations may range from improving the Head Start program with outreach services to mandatory pre-school training sessions for all children in the community between the ages of three and five. Although the latter alternative may actually have greater impact on the children's learning abilities, the former alternative may be more politically and budgetarily feasible. The result of this approach may be a set of alternative solutions to articulated problems. To call this process "needs assessment" describes it less clearly than does "policy priority setting."

Once again an overlap occurs between the different interpretations of "needs assessment." In this instance "policy priority setting" is a process of interpreting available information in a way to make it useful to public officials. This process may or may not include "survey research" as a method to collect information 18/ and as a sub-process of "assessing need." 19/ In addition, "policy priority setting" might be seen as a process similar to "problem identification and diagnosis" since it sets out information about problems in a community but goes one step further to present a set of possible solutions and rank them according to desirability and feasibility. These processes are sometimes seen as "needs assessment" separately and in combination.

5. "Needs Assessment" as any other type of data or analysis

Finally, "needs assessment" can be used to mean other useful information generating activities which the "needs assessment" literature may or may not mention:

- o Social indicators may be an useful way to measure the status of problems in the population. But standing alone, they do not take into consideration political conditions and budgetary priorities. They can be used as a part of the data in "problem-identification" and "priority setting." 20/
- o Cost-benefit analysis is an analytic approach to trying to determine which alternative action is most likely to maximize the public welfare. Contrary to the common, lay connotation of the term, an "efficient" policy in economic terms is not a frugal or cost-cutting policy, but one which attempts to answer the question "which is the least costly alternative for achieving a given benefit?" a type of study often called cost-effectiveness analysis. A single cost-benefit analysis is ecletic in its use of information and a single study will often include survey results, social research evaluation results, etc. The approach also includes methods for reaching tentative or conditional conclusions when data are not complete or accurate. 21/

- o Impact evaluation is an attempt to trace the effects of a program on a population group. Impact evaluations provide, in principle, information on whether given programs in fact alleviate specified problems. Although the methods used to gather information may be similar to those of "needs assessment", impact evaluation is narrower in focus because it is directed toward a specific program and is performed after the program has been implemented.
- o Planning programming and budgeting (PPBS) is an approach to planning and resource allocation. Its basic prescriptions are managerial, and involve establishing staff and processes to present information to decision-makers. PPBS emphasizes (a) program budgets, (b) multi-year planning and (c) benefit-cost and related approaches to systematic analysis as sources of information. Since these elements are themselves largely eclectic in their use of primary sources, requiring primarily that information presented be relevant to decision-making, PPBS advocates would presumably see "needs assessment" as one type of input, useful when applicable to a problem of choice.

All of the analysis techniques just listed include information-producing requirements which have some similarity to those of "needs assessment." This is further evidence that "needs assessment" may be used in place of more common labels to refer to a broad range of data collection and analysis methods.

In conclusion, "needs assessment" is used as an all-encompassing term for many information-gathering and/or analysis activities. Overlap often occurs between the assorted components of the term. "Survey research", "causal analysis", "problem identification and diagnosis", "political feasibility ranking", and "policy priority setting" may be performed in various combinations and called "needs assessment," while it is also possible to refer to each separate activity as "needs assessment." What results from the many interpretations of the phrase is confusion on the part of the reader as to which one the literature is referring to. For instance, "needs assessment" to a statistician may connote methods of information collection ("survey research") and to an elected official could be a listing of policy issues which are feasible and manageable within a given term in office. And if a statistician proposes to do a "needs assessment" for a politician it may happen that there will be difficulties in communication for both. To call such widely differing processes assessments of "need" neither describes what is sought nor how to seek it, unless one previously defines the subject in an arbitrary and specific manner. This is not to say anything better has been identified, but rather to point out the problems and implications of the process of information collection at hand.

Therefore, in total, it appears that one way out of the confusion of "needs assessment" is to specify the type of "needs assessment" that is being suggested, employed, or discussed and to state the limitations which

are placed upon the word "need." Another way to alleviate the semantic problem may be to strike the term from the human services vocabulary. But this is not a viable solution since the phrase "needs assessment" has become engrained in the human services world, and an entire movement appears to have begun. 22/ And "needs assessment" has such intuitive appeal that it would be hard to eliminate the term. A more practical alternative would be to recognize that the term has many personalities and to clarify its meaning by using existing terms to refer to existing activities. More importantly, researchers and analysts must choose the tool that fits the job regardless of its label.

II. "Needs assessment": A Critique of its Potential Utility

Neither "needs" nor "needs assessment" have emerged with clear, unique definitions. "Needs" is used as a global word describing all imaginable wants, and "needs assessment" is used synonymously with many information collection and/or analysis techniques. The common denominator of many of the definitions of "needs assessment" is the collection of information about a community in order to aid in policy decision-making, a change-oriented process. Change may occur through new or revised legislation, altered eligibility requirements, or altered funding levels. Although the term "needs assessment" lacks specific definition, the idea of using methods of information collection and analysis to help make better decisions has a long tradition. For example, PPBS, and cost-benefit analysis both were intended to produce information collection and/or analysis for this purpose. But it is not true that all information is inherently useful. Therefore it may be argued that any method of data collection and/or analysis done without consideration of how and where it would be used is a useless exercise. Within the realm of human services planning, decisions are made with and without information. "Needs assessment" is supposed to alleviate the problem of decision-making with wrong or insufficient data. But what seems to have occurred is that the data collection has been over-emphasized and the aim of usefulness has been under-emphasized.

A. "Needs Assessment": The Users

The usefulness of "needs assessment" information to decison-makers should be considered before data is collected and analyzed. Some important

questions to ask are:

- Who wants the "needs assessment" information?
- Who will make the decisions based on the "needs assessment" information? (elected officials, program administrators, office managers, etc.?)
- How do they actually make decisions? (with the aid of political feasibility analysis, policy analysis, statistical analysis, etc.?)
- What form do the decisions take? (proposed legislation, altered funding priorities, administrative change recommendations, etc.?)
- What specific questions will have to be answered to affect what specific decisions?
- To what extent will "needs assessment" information influence these decisions or answer these questions?

It may be more useful for a "needs assessment" process to begin with the types of information the decision-makers may require for their decisions. Then data collection and data analysis approaches could be selected and structured in accordance with the types of decisions with which they can help. After the techniques have been determined, they could be applied to collect the information from primary sources (e.g., service recipients, the nonservice community, service providers etc.), as well as secondary sources, (e.g., program records, census tracts, etc.). This does not mean that decision-makers should be consulted at every step of information-generation, but that the "researchers" should always be aware of the reason for the activity. By identifying the intended users of the collected data, the product could be designed to better suit their purposes. Statistical data, it could be said, is no more useful to a politician than is a party platform useful in the abstract to a statistician. By keeping these issues in their proper perspective research could be more relevant and analysis more comprehensible to the individuals who would use it.

B. "Needs Assessment": The Environment

An issue related to the information needs of decision-makers is the reason for the "needs assessment" process to be used (or suggested) in the first place. Questions to be considered are:

- o What is the nature of the decision-making environment?
- o For what specific purpose and in what context has the "needs assessment" been initiated? (historical habit? a new policy area to be explored? new or unallocated funds available without restriction? Required by statute or regulation?)

An underlying assumption that exists in the "needs assessment" literature seems to be that the generation of information will automatically lead to decisions and change. This is rarely if ever the case. "Needs assessment" may be done to justify a certain level of funding or to legitimize political action taken by elected officials or to maintain the status quo or as an advocacy tool. And what if "needs assessment" were to turn up new and different problems within a community? Would budgets be too low to serve all of the newly articulated "needs" and would expectations be aroused in the population which could not be fulfilled? Seldom does enough extra money or administrative flexibility exist to permit a community to locate and solve all or most of its problems. Rather than identify 1000 "needs," it may be better to identify three achievable reforms. Perhaps in doing so, one could do 1000/3 times less work, which would be much more efficient and productive.

In conclusion, information does not inherently lead to change. Therefore it may be more useful to generate information from a given population when a change is intended beforehand. When reform is seen as part of a plan or decision-making environment, then specific information may aid in making better (more equitable, effective, efficient, etc.) decisions. Change in a desired direction can only come about through conscious determination to do so. Through the careless assumption on the part of decision-makers and data collectors that data automatically lead to change, the result may be merely mediocre. Therefore "needs assessment" can only live up to the reputation of being a cornerstone to decision-making, and therefore a change-oriented process, if the "assessors" (collectors and users) are devoted to reform. 23/ The "needs assessment" process is a means to an end. And if the goal (useful information for decision-making) is obscured by the process (data collection and/or analysis) then "needs assessment" may become a futile exercise.

Appendix: An Annotated Bibliography of "Needs Assessment" Literature

The following is a set of abstracts of selected sources on the concept of "needs assessment." 24/ The structure of each abstract is as follows: (A) The type of document, (B) How the document defines "need," (C) How the document defines "needs assessment," (D) What methods of data collection and/or analysis are suggested for "needs assessment," (E) Other important or interesting information, and (F) Comments or critiques of the literature.

The materials included are:

	Page
Bowers and Associates, A Guide to Needs Assessment in Community Education Programs. Reston Virginia	21
Center for Social Research and Development, Analysis and Synthesis of Needs Assessment in the Field of Human Services. Denver Research Institute, University of Denver, 1972	23
Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, Division of Planning and Evaluation, Bureau of Research and Evaluation, Annotated Bibliography of Needs Assessment. April 1975, Found in: Project Share, Needs Assessment, Human Services Bibliography Series, August 1976	25
Hatry, Harry, Louis Blair, Donald Fisk, and Wayne Kimmel, Program Analysis for State and Local Governments. Urban Institute: Washington, D.C., 1976	27
Horton, Gerald T., Needs Assessment in a Title XX State Social Services Planning System. Human Services Institute for Children and Families, Inc.: Arlington Virginia	29
Institute of Social Sciences for Rural-Urban Research and Planning, Human Needs Assessment of the First Planning and Development District of South Dakota. Brookings, South Dakota, 1974	31

Page

Institute of Social Sciences for Rural-Urban Research and Planning, Human Needs Assessment of the Fourth, Fifth, and sixth Planning and Development Districts of South Dakota. Brookings, South Dakota, 1974 31

League of California Cities, Handbook Assessing Human Needs. California, 1975 33

Minnehan, Robert F., Robert A Wilson, and Norfleet W. Rives, Jr., How to Do It... Concepts and Techniques for Evaluation and Planning 36

Office of Neighborhood Government on Experiment and Community Participation, The Community Feedback Project. New York, New York, 1974 39

Shapek, Raymond A., "Problems and Deficiencies in the Needs Assessment Process," Public Administration Review, Volume 35, Special Issue, December 1975, p. 754-758 40

Warheit, George J., Roger A. Bell, and John J. Schwab, Planning for Change: Needs Assessment Approaches, Department of Physchiatry, University of Florida, undated, 220pp. 42

Webb, Kenneth and Harry P. Hatry, Obtaining Citizen Feedback, Urban Institute: Washington, D.C., 1973 44

Bowers and Associates, A Guide to Needs Assessment in Community Education Programs. Reston, Virginia

A. Type of document

A guide to a method of needs assessment used to help communities determine the location and severity of "need" when applying for small grants to use in making school buildings available for non-educational purposes in evenings, weekends, and summers.

B. "Needs" defined

"Needs" are left undefined.

C. "Needs assessment" defined

"All community education programs use, or have used at one time, a needs assessment to determine the content of their program." It is seen as a process for "identifying needs, setting objectives, setting priorities, and relating them to the community education program on a continuing basis." The usefulness of needs assessment is that it aids in relating program resources to the level they are needed in the community. Needs assessment is used to help in setting objectives and measuring results with scarce resources. And reassessment is necessary to continually readjust the program to meet changing need.

D. Methods of "needs assessment" suggested

"Step 1 - Roles and Functions: Identifying People in the Process

Step 2 - A Common Language: Naming the needs

Step 3 - Surveys: Findings the need through hearings, interviews, mail-out surveys

Step 4 - Measuring and Ranking: Assigning values to needs

Step 5 - Priorities: Rating the needs

Step 6 - Objectives: Translating needs into programs"

E. Other interesting information

None

F. Comments:

- o Needs are undefined, yet there is an assumption that needs can be named, measured, ranked, and translated into programs.
- o There appears to be an assumption that needs change.
- o The guide does not discuss alternatives to surveys, or how to "measure" or "rank". It provides formats for rankings but no analytic criteria for arriving at rankings.
- o In this case the "needs assessment" is required by law. One could wonder why as an alternative to the whole procedure described by Bowers the program could not simply require that each community provide for an open and fair application process by which potential users could compete. The specific use should determine the particular analytic or decision-making approach taken.

Center for Social Research and Development, Analysis and Synthesis of Needs Assessment in the Field of Human Services
Denver Research Institute: University of Denver, 1972

A. Type of document

A manual describing many methods of "needs assessment" with very little analysis.

B. Definition of "need"

"Needs are social definitions, representing a view of what an individual or group requires in order to play a role, meet a commitment, participate adequately in social process, retain an adequate level of energy and productivity at a given moment of history."

C. Definition of "needs assessment"

"Needs assessment is a change oriented process, whereas resource allocation is a political process. Social planning and resource allocation should be responsive to problems and needs of the population and ... these needs should be ascertained through an objective process." Needs assessment can also be done by the political process. "Needs assessment deals with the attempt to define what is required to insure that a population is able to function at an acceptable level in various domains of living."

D. Methods of "needs assessment" suggested

A framework used for needs assessment is to: 1) identify the goals of the society, 2) describe the present status of the population in relation to these goals, 3) find the reasons behind the identified discrepancies or problem, and 4) identify service resources, 5) gather data on availability, continuity and accessibility of the delivery system, 6) find information on causal, corrollary and symptomatic problems and 8) identify alternate responses. The answer to the above questions can be sought through secondary data analysis, general population survey, service providers survey, political

and community leaders survey, and/or a management information survey.

E. Other interesting information

This work contains an extensive bibliography on "needs assessment"

F. Comments:

- o It is assumed that "needs" can be located and assessed through an objective process, but this assumption is not defended, or any possible appraoch to its implementation described.
- o What is an "acceptable level" at which a population is able to function?
- o The definition of "need" is very broad and implies no limit.
- o One could question whether "needs assessment" is any less political or more change-oriented than the resource allocation process.
- o The "method" suggested appears to be roughly much like any standard outline of planning/systems analysis for resource allocation.
- o This approach is very similar to a "gap-filling", "problem-identification" approach and appears to pay little attention to surveys.

Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, Division of Planning and Evaluation, Bureau of Research and Evaluation, Annotated Bibliography of Needs Assessment, April 1975 Found in: Project Share, Needs Assessment, Human Services Bibliography Series, August 1976

A. Type of Document

An annotated bibliography which includes material on needs assessment. Additional material is included on areas conceptually related to "needs assessment": social indicators, resource assessment, evaluative research, service utilization analysis and organizational analysis.

B. Definition of "Need"

"Needs" are left undefined.

C. Definition of "Needs Assessment"

"Needs assessment can most simply be defined as a method which enumerates and describes the needs of people living in a community."

D. Methods of "Needs Assessment" Suggested

"The articles represent various methodologies which have been utilized to assess needs including the key informant approach, the community forum approach, analysis of existing client records, social indicators analysis, and field surveys of communities or clients."

E. Other Useful Information

Social indicators are considered directly related to "needs assessment" in that "(these statistics) indicate the relative well-being of a population in major social problem areas." "Resource assessment" is seen as "the capacity of an area to meet the service needs of its residents." To use "needs assessment" as a policy and program planning tool, a "systematic assessment of resources" is required.

"Evaluative Research refers to the evaluation of the service delivery system in terms of efficiently and effectively serving people in need." Some methods of this process are cited: "cost-benefit analysis, client's evaluation of received services, and program management by objectives." "Evaluative research can further define the needs assessment data into the process of budgetary and program formation."

Service Utilization analysis emphasizes client interaction with the service delivery system.

F. Comments:

- o How does one enumerate and describe "needs" of community residents when "needs" are not defined?
- o Taken alone social indicators may not be able to indicate relative well-being in that there are important factors that are often not captured in quantitative social indicators (e.g., the awareness of a community residents about what kind of services are available, the feeling in the community towards any paternalism in the human service delivery system.)
- o What is the distinguishing characteristic between resource assessment and evaluative research?
- o The annotations seem to give useful descriptions of the processes discussed in the literature. However, there is no analysis or even question raised as to the usefulness or success of the techniques in practice.

Hatry, Harry, Louis Blair, Donald Fisk, and Wayne Kimmel,
Program Analysis for State and Local Governments
Urban Institute: Washington, D.C. 1976

A. Type of document

A book describing several evaluation procedures. ("Needs assessment" only gets a few words.)

B. Definition of "need"

"Need" is seen to be difficult to define. However, expressed and latent consumer demand is considered similar to the notion of need. Expressed demand accounts for the individuals who are or have used the available service. Latent demand is the potential use of the service if clients were better informed about its availablity, if there were modifications made on service delivery, if it was more accessible or attractive, or if it was less expensive.

C. Definition of "needs assessment"

"Needs assessment" is analysis to determine how well an alternative will meet the estimated need for a service. It is also used to improve knowledge about performance of a given service program.

D. Methods of "needs assessment" suggested

Sources and methods of "needs assessment" suggested are: To investigate past incidence of problems (statistical data), demographic information, technical indications of conditions (weather, pollution, road quality, etc.,), data on past expressed demand (use of available services), community survey (social or human service problems unmet by services), or complaint

data (within the service agency). In combination the above data can provide estimates for incidence and severity of need in certain areas.

E. Other useful information

Book seems very useful as a guide to the topics it covers.

F. Comments:

- The authors do not explain the difference between "need" and "consumer demand" and apparently view the latter as the only reasonable interpretation
- The authors fail to argue or show that "needs assessment" is different from cost-benefit analysis and systems analysis.
- By stating that a program is working "well" does that mean equitably, effectively, efficiently, some of the above, all of the above, none of the above?
- These authors suggest that the researchers choose the data and/or analysis approach pertinent to the precise problem at hand.

Horton, Gerald T., Needs Assessment in a Title XX State Social Services Planning System Human Services Institute for Children and Families, Inc.: Arlington, Virginia

A. Type of document

Pamphlet prescribing a certain method of "needs assessment" for Title XX services. It has been widely distributed within HEW as well as outside.

B. Definition of "need"

"A human need is any identifiable condition which limits a person as an individual or a family member in meeting his or her full potential...which is usually expressed in social, economic or health related terms and are frequently qualitative statements." "Needs data" is information currently available from a variety of sources with which needs may be identified, quantified and generally substantiated.

C. Definition of "needs assessment"

"Needs assessment" is the process by which one determines which services are to be provided by Title XX planning; "a resolution of many viewpoints as to which are the state's high priority or urgent needs." Another definition is: "Needs assessment is closely related to goal and objective setting in that needs data provides a measure of demand for services against which the service goals and objectives should be set," and "needs assessment" provides a measure by which resources are allocated.

D. Method of "needs assessment"

A suggested framework for "needs assessment" data is: 1) develop work program for needs assessment which would document existing data sources for each population group, define existing client data base and discuss steps to correlate data to be used, 2) write a summary of services needed (displaying needs data and assigning state-wide priorities, and 3) write a summary of existing resource utilization. Suggested information gathering techniques are: community surveys, key informants method, case analysis, and census statistics analysis. Then the data should be collected and analyzed from secondary sources such as: census tracts, special studies, local planning data and existing agency surveys. Finally, the data should be utilized for decisionmaking.

E. Other Useful Information

None.

F. Comments:

- o The definition of "need" is broad. It does not indicate what is not a "need."
- o How is a "need" substantiated?
- o No criteria are given or suggested to determine what are state's "high priority" or "urgent" "needs."
- o How can it be assured that the information will be used for decisionmaking?
- o No discussion of weight to give effectiveness of services in meeting "needs" or in selecting priorities.
- o No information on how "needs" data can be analyzed across services.

Institute of Social Sciences for Rural-Urban Research and Planning, Human Needs Assessment of the First Planning and Development District of South Dakota
First Planning and Development District; Model Rural Development Program
Brookings, South Dakota, 1974

Institute of Social Sciences for Rural-Urban Research and Planning, Human Needs Assessment of the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Planning and Development Districts of South Dakota
Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Planning and Development Districts; Model Rural Development Program
Brookings, South Dakota, 1974

A. Type of document

Actual "needs assessments" of the First Planning and Development District of South Dakota and the Fourth, fifth and Sixth Planning and Development Districts of South Dakota.

B. Definition of "need"

"Needs" are seen as "problems, opinions and attitudes of District One, Four, Five, and Six residents." The taxonomy of "need" is"

1. Survival needs: include those essentials that effect an individual's capability to physically exist. These include employment and income, nutrition, health, clothing, housing and transportation.

2. Socialization needs: involve the individual's acquisition of those habits, attitudes, social roles, group norms and self-concepts that enable him to interact positively and effectively in his society. Religious and educational institutions as well as business, fraternal, and social organizations respond to this need.

3. Social control needs: involve maintaining order. These include the need for property protection, civil rights, and behavioral control of people to minimize conflict with others. Law and law enforcement are the primary means.

4. Social Participation Needs: involve participation in formal and informal organizations and are an important means of establishing and maintaining communications with other members of society. One's ability to adapt to changing social and economic conditions in order to maintain self-sufficiency and independence is enhanced through communications and interactions with other members of society. Organizations are also important as agents of social change.

5. Mutual Support Needs: occur when a person or family needs outside assistance. During pioneer days, the "grub stake" was often used to help someone get started.

D. Method of "needs assessment" suggested

The technique used is to carry on person-to-person interviews using the family as a unit.

E. Other useful information

None.

F. Comments:

o The taxonomy of "needs" can include all wants, tastes, and preferences.

League of California Cities, Handbook Assessing Human Needs California, 1975

A. Type of document

A manual describing several methods of how to do "needs assessment."

B. Definition of "need"

"Social needs are those requirements in mankind for conditions that will allow survival, existence, growth, and fulfillment.... They include needs for adequate shelter, nourishment, health, knowledge, income, personal development, social involvement, political organization and personal liberty.... Basic needs...may then be translated by individual communities into goals and service as benchmarks against which to measure local conditions and progress." Needs to be met can be placed in a priority listing: "Goal I: Adequate Income and Economic Opportunity, Goal II: Optimal Environmental Conditions for Provision of Basic Material Needs, Goal III: Optimal Health, Goal IV: Adequate Knowledge and Skills, Goal V: Optimal Personal and Social Adjustment and Development, and Goal VI: Adequately Organized Social Instrumentalities."

C. Definition of "needs assessment"

"Social needs are always present. Social benchmarks are not achieved. The purpose of the social needs assessment process is to identify those social needs which are not being met.... A broad statement of human needs

upon which to base the social needs assessment implies a recognition of the fact that policies and programs may not easily be separated into personal, social or physical."

D. Method of "needs assessment" suggested

The method suggested includes the collection of statistical data and the detection of social problems through citizen surveys and participation. "The purpose of the needs assessment process is to provide an understanding of the variety of outstanding social problems existing in the community as a basis for developing long-range city policies and priorities." The types of techniques of primary data collection included are interviews and questionnaires (person-to-person or telephone). Pertinent secondary data can be found in social indicators and program resources inventory.

E. Other useful information

"Needs assessment" is aid to fit into the following policymaking chronology:

I. Problem Identification
   Statistical Inventory
   Subjective Inventory
   Summary of Findings
II. Resources Identification
   Service Inventory
   Program Evaluation

III. Problem Analysis and Comparison of Resources and Problems

Resources and Problems

Evaluation of Service Capacity and Quality of Service Delivery

Existing Problem Areas and Possible Priorities for City Attention

The Comprehensive Social Planning and Decisionmaking Process puts needs assessment near the beginning of the chain of events:

Preparation

Needs Assessment

Policy Development

Program Development

Implementation

Monitoring and Evaluation

F. Comments:

- o The definition of "needs" is broad and does not imply what is not a "need."
- o How are "needs" identified?
- o How does "needs assessment" provide a baisis for the development of long-range policies and priorities?

Minnehan, Robert F., Robert A. Wilson and Norfleet W. Rives Jr., How To Do It...Concepts and Techniques for Evaluation and Planning

A. Type of document

A manual describing and analyzing several methodologies of evaluation.

B. Definition of "need"

"Needs" are articulated in terms of: "(a) resources, (b) activities, (c) services, and (d) outcomes." "Needs are translated into a supply plan, or supply of services plan, where resources, activities, and services levels are detailed in some form that can be (a) evaluated prior to the project beginning, (b) serve as monitoring guides, and (c) serve as post-project evaluation criterion."

C. Definition of "needs assessment"

"A 'need' statement is a specification based on comparison between (a) some desirable level of resources, activities, services or outcomes as related to the population base, (b) some existing level or supply of resources, activities, services or outcomes as related to the population."

D. Method of "needs assessment"

The set of questions suggested for use to assess need in a community is:

I. Evaluation of program planning

A. Before the program beings

1. What are the target populations?

2.a What are their needs?

2.b Is meeting their needs worthwhile?

3.a What are the existing service programs?

3.b What service gaps exist?

4.a What programs promise to meet these gaps efficiently and effectively?

4.b Should the existing set of programs be over-hauled?

5. What service goals and/or performance criteria are specified for this program?

(Some statement of goals or criteria is usually a precondition for evaluation, i.e., if there are no pre-established goals or criteria, then what can be used for evaluation?

B. After the program is operating

1. Has the program "made a difference" from a community impact perspective?

2. Is the program worth the expenditure?

3. How can this program be improved?

4. Has this program complied with the regulations?

The stated chronology of events is: "The Population (has) Needs (which are recognized and studied, then with a consideration of) Resources (a set of) Service Goals (are developed, and these become the basis for evaluating the) Activities, Services (and) Outcomes (that result from the program's operations)." "This outcome data, or the other measures on resources activities, and services can be compared with the needs or service goals,

as a test of whether the 'supply of services' meets some plan for services or needs."

E. Other useful information

None.

F. Comments:

- The definition of "need" is unclear.
- The "needs assessment process does not take into consideration any previously unarticulated 'needs'."
- What does it mean to "make a difference"?
- How does one decide how much meeting their "needs" is "worth while"?

Office of Neighborhood Government, An Experiment in Community Participation; The Citizen Feedback Project
New York, 1974

A. Type of document

A manual examining a certain type of survey technique: a panel of citizen-consultants.

B. Definition of "need"

"Need" is left undefined.

C. Definition of "needs assessment"

"A project that would feed back information from local service consumers could be an invaluable resource to district officers by identifying service gaps, incongruities between citizen and agency perceptions of service benefits, needs in the community that cannot be serviced by existing agency structures, and resources allocation priorities among community residents that are not congruent with current agency priorities." It is used to create community support for the Office of Neighborhood residents and to aid in tailoring municipal services to the needs of individual communities.

D. Method of "needs assessment" suggested

The "needs assessment" method suggested is a citizen panel paid to discuss problems within the community. They are consultants to the local government, who are recruited according to the demographic characteristics of the community.

E. Other useful information

None

F. Comments

- "Needs" are not defined.
- There is an assumption that the information produced will be useful to decisionmakers.
- Why isn't this called, simply, "citizen participation"?

Shapek, Raymond A., "Problems and Deficiencies in the Needs Assessment Process" Public Administration Review. Volume 35, Special Issue, December 1975 pp. 754-758

A. Type of document

An article discussing problems with the "needs assessment" process.

B. Definition of "need"

Needs are left undefined.

C. Definition of "needs assessment"

Priority listings of need within a community which tend not to be very useful.

D. Method of "needs assessment" suggested

Any method of "needs assessment" can be used. The analytical step in any method chosen is stressed.

E. Other interesting information

"Needs assessment" fails to aid in resource allocation because crises situations, internal structure, political preferences, pre-scheduled activities, etc., take priority and deplete funds before "needs assessment" is taken into consideration. "... Researchers tend to become engrossed in methodology, and the meaning of the survey becomes secondary to the method of collection and the subsequent deluge of data." It is

difficult to measure future needs from present priority listings which often reflect symptoms not causes of given situations; therefore it is necessary to pair analysis with information-gathering for viable, useful 'needs assessment'."

F. Comments:

- o There is a substantial questioning of the common assumption that data speaks for itself.

Warheit, George J., Roger A. Bell, and John J. Schwab, Planning for Change: Needs Assessment Approaches, Department of Psychiatry, University of Florida, Undated, 220 pp.

A. Type of document

A manual broadly defining "needs assessment" and suggesting certain methods for how to do it.

B. Definition of "need"

"Need" is left undefined.

C. Definition of "needs assessment"

"A needs assessment program can most simply be defined as an attempt to enumerate the needs of a population living in a community." A tool is applied in the agency and the community to gather information on a given "social area." Needs assessment in this document is a part of a larger research process of (1) descriptive baseline, (2) needs assessment, (3) evaluation-outcome, and (4) impact studies. Data analysis is done: "(1) to identify the extent and kinds of needs there are in a community, (2) to evaluate systematically their existing programs, and (3) to plan new ones in the light of the community's needs and service patterns." The results determine priorities in program development and planning.

D. Methods of "needs assessment" suggested

Research is done by those commited to change. A steering committee is selected, a project director appointed as the first cut to define,

conceptualize and operationalize the objectives of the program. Then the group must begin to locate the required data by checking available secondary sources, including information of the agency doing the "needs assessment" and providing the services, and the community being served [baseline data]. Next, there are several needs assessment methods available: "(1) the key informant approach, (2) the community forum approach, (3) the rate and under-treatment approach, (4) the social indicators approach, and (5) the field survey approach. The type(s) used for needs assessments is (are) determined by which method best secures the information needed to fulfill the goals set up in the first cut. (The authors recommend the latter three categories.) The results must be summarized in a report which presents the research design and the data collected and recommends action. Postulates are laid out as to the likelihood the decision-making organizations will agree to the recommendations proposed in the needs assessment study.

E. Other useful information

None.

F. Comments:

- o "Need" is left undefined.
- o By not consulting the users beforehand, there is an unsupported assumption that the decisionmakers will use the generated information.
- o How do the results "determine" priorities?

Webb, Kenneth, and Harry P. Hatry, Obtaining Citizen Feedback, Urban Institute: Washington, D.C., 1973

A. Type of document

A manual describing how to do surveys of various actors in the human services delivery process. The focus is on survey research as a technique, not on "needs assessment".

B. Definition of "need"

"Need" is left undefined.

C. Definition of "needs assessment"

"'Needs assessment' in the form of surveys are an efficient way of obtaining information on: (1) constituents' satisfaction with the quality of specific services including identification of problem areas, (2) facts such as the numbers and characteristics of users and non-users of various services, (3) the reasons that specific services are disliked or not used, (4) potential demands for new services, and (5) citizen opinions on various community issues, including feelings of alienation toward government and officials." This information can be used by local governments to set priorities for resource allocation and determine actions to improve existing programs. "...to test the public pulse."

D. Method of "needs assessment"

To obtain representative data on how a community is served by existing services the steps suggested are: "(1) decide on topics desired, degree

of accuracy, and approximate survey cost, (2) select mode of survey, (3) design the questionnaire, (4) design the sampling plan, (5) recruit and train interviewers, (6) perform pretest, (7) conduct survey, (8) edit, code, and tabulate data, (9) analyze and interpret findings, and (10) use information for decisionmaking." Types of surveys available are: (1) the mailed (self-administered) questionnaire, (2) the telephone interview survey, and (3) the personal, face-to-face interview.

E. Other useful information

None.

F. Comments:

- o "Need" is not defined.
- o How can "satisfaction" be measured?
- o Method of interpretation is not mentioned.

FOOTNOTES

1) In a very narrow interpretation of the word, "need" does not encompass more than basic existence. Anything beyond this strict definition is considered a want. Therefore, in terms of human services the process of "needs assessment" may more correctly be termed "wants assessment." But, the term "needs assessment," as conjectured by individuals in the area of human services, was born in the human services world where it had become the government's prerogative to help "needy" people. So "needs" may have taken on the self-actualization connotation (whatever that may be), as well as that of basic survival.

2) For example, see Bowers and Associates, A Guide to Needs Assessment in Community Education Programs; Warheit, George J., Roger A. Bell, and John J. Schwaf, Planning for Change: Needs Assessment Approaches, and Webb, Kenneth, and Harry P. Hatry, Obtaining Citizen Feedback.

3) "Needs assessment" as a data-gathering approach shades into a different set of activities called client casework. Several programs practice face-to-face tracking with individual clients. This is sometimes called "needs assessment," as in Head Start, and sometimes "employability planning," as in the WIN program. In addition, "individual needs" are sometimes seem as client "needs" in relation to a specific social services program or set of programs.

4) The notion of paternalism is an important one in relation to the subject of "needs assessment," but it is beyond the scope of this paper. The topic is quickly examined again later in the paper.

5) "Needs" are not self-evident, and therefore, may be arbitrarily selected by those who assess them. The implication of this problem can be seen in a related context. Francis has shown that any system of social indicators' results will be determined in large part by the initial selection of indicator areas. Francis, Walton, "What Social Indicators Don't Indicate," Evaluation, Vol. I, No. 2, 1973, pp. 79-83.

6) Webster's Dictionary defines information as: "the communication or reception of knowledge or intelligence." In other words, facts (numbers and words) are not information if they cannot be transferred from one individual to another without the loss of significance.

7) For example, Bowers and Associates consider the "needs assessment" process as a set of steps: Step 1 Roles and Functions: Identifying People in the Process; Step 2 A Common Language: Naming like needs; Step 3 Surveys: Finding the needs through hearings, interviews, mailout surveys; Step 4 Measuring and Ranking: Assigning values to needs, Step 5 Priorities: Rating the needs; and Step 6 Objectives: Translating needs into programs. On the other hand, the Institute of Social Sciences for Rural Urban Research and Planning (South Dakota) see the "needs assessment" process as one of simple community surveys to identify "need" according to a predetermined taxonomy. Both sources use "needs assessment" as the descriptive label yet they do not encompass the same elements.

8) As cited in, for example, Office of Neighborhood Government on Experiments and Community Participation, The Citizen Feedback Project.

9) Discussed by, for instance, Louis Blair, Donald Fisk, and Wayne Kimmel, Program Analysis for State and Governments.

10) Seen in Center for Social Research and Development, Analysis and Synthesis of Needs Assessment in the Field of Human Services.

11) As examined by, for example, Bowers and Associates, A Guide to Needs Assessment in Community Education Programs, Horton, Gerald T., Needs Assessment in Title XX State Social Services Planning System; Webb, Kenneth, and Harry P. Hatry, Obtaining Citizen Feedback.

12) "Needs" cannot be assessed in the same mathematical way as can property taxes.

13) It has been said that Survey and Social research per se is not often not useful. Morrill, William A., Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, and Walton J. Francis, "Remarks on Evaluation From the HEW Perspective," prepared for presentation at the Federal Executive Institute, Workshop on Program Management, Charlottesville, Virginia, May 3, 1976.

14) For example, California League of Cities cites the following activities 1) problem identification (which includes statistical and subjective inventory); 2) resource identification (which contains service inventory and program evaluation); and 3) problem analysis and comparision of resources and problems; all within the general headings of "needs assessment."

15) "The individual's wants, as reflected by his utility function may be distinguished from his effective demands, determined by his utility function and the constraints, such as income, that bind him." Steiner, Peter O., Public Expenditure Budgeting, Brookings Institution: Washington, D.C., 1969, p. 18

16) One exception is the Urban Institute, who feel that "need" closely resembles "consumer demand." Hatry, Harry, Louis Blair, Donald Fisk, and Wayne Kimmel, Program Analysis for State and Local Governments Urban Institute: Washington, D.C., 1976

17) It may also be argued that much information is not recorded in secondary sources. (Crime is a perfect example of such a lack.) Also, secondary data has the same built-in biases as any primary data that can be collected, with the added fault that it is not as "fresh" as newly collected primary data. But the point at hand is that if biased primary data is going to be collected on a subject where it has been done before, then its re-collection is wasted time and expense.

18) As seen in the Bowers and Associates literature.

19) As seen in Gerald Horton, Needs Assessment in a Title XX State Social Services Planning System.

20) Two useful summaries and critiques of social indicators are:

Francis, Walton, "What Social Indicators Don't Indicate," Evaluation, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1973, p. 79-83.

Schneider, Mark, "The 'Quality of Life' and Social Indicators Research," Public Administration Review, May/June 1976, Volume 36, No. 3, pp. 297-305.

Both Schneider and Francis also deal with the use of, and interpretation of, survey data on individual wants.

21) For works describing the principles and the applications of cost-benefit analysis, see:

Haveman, Robert H. and Julius Margolis (eds), Public Expenditure and Policy Analysis, Markham Publishers: Chicago, 1970

Dolfman, Robert (ed.), Measuring Benefits of Government Investments, Brookings Institution: Washington, D.C. 1969.

Steiner, Peter O., Public Expenditure Budgeting
Brookings Institution: Washington, D.C., 1969

On the special topic of uncertainty, see:

Raiffa, Howard, Decision Analysis Under Uncertainty
Addison-Wesley: Reading, 1968

22) The occurence of the conference on "needs assessment in Louisville, Kentucky in summer 1976 indicates that a "movement" has indeed begun. For conference proceedings see:

Bell, Roger A., Martin Sundell, Joseph F. Aponte, and Stanley A. Murrell, Need Assessment in Health and Human Services
Louville, Kentucky, 1976